



Photo from Ulrike Gahn

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Marriage in Germany

Ulrike Gahn from Germany

All over the world people get married and depending on their cultural background, religious beliefs and family customs, they perform diverse--more or less colorful, sometimes exotic--ceremonies. I'd like to give you an idea about the way couples start their married life in Germany.

Although the number of single households continuously increases, people still get married. Remarkably enough, education levels determine the time of their marriage: the higher the education, the older couples are when they enter into matrimony. In former times, year-long engagements were required. Nowadays short engagements are common and most couples skip engagement at all.

There is an entertaining custom to "punish" men and women who reach the age of thirty and still aren't married. Accompanied by their friends, those "offenders" are taken to the city hall where the men have to sweep clean the stairs and the women have to clean the shoe-polish-covered door handles of the building. Only if a "virgin" from the opposite gender gives them a kiss are they allowed to stop their cleaning activities.

In contrast to the U.S. where you can get married in hours, in Germany you have to give a six-week notice of your intended marriage to the city. After that, the civil wedding may take place in the city hall, usually only with a few people such as two witnesses and the parents attending. Nevertheless, sometimes friends gather in front of the city hall to congratulate.

Some days before the wedding, friends and relatives bring old porcelain and kitchenware to throw on the ground in front of bride and groom. This is supposed to grant them a happy, lucky life; that's why this evening event is called Polterabend--the evening with lots of broken porcelain. The German proverb--"Scherben bringen Glück"--which can be translated as "Broken crockery brings you luck." is derived from this custom. The Polterabend often develops into an informal and casual party.

If couples decide to have a church wedding in addition to that--and most do--the civil wedding is scheduled one week or one day before the ceremony in church.

Bride and groom put a lot of effort to plan and prepare the ceremony and the following celebration. At least six months ahead, a room in a restaurant or hotel is reserved, the band is ordered and paper and design of the invitation cards are chosen. The menu has to be considered, and they meet with the priest to talk about the mass: songs, readings, and the ceremony itself are determined. My husband and I prepared a small booklet which was given as a handout to every guest in church to provide them with all the songs and the outline of the wedding.

On the wedding day, the bride enters the church in a long, usually white

dress, carrying her flower bouquet. Escorted by her father, she makes her way to the groom, who is waiting for her in his dark elegant suit with neck or bow tie in front of the altar. We gave our promise without any assistance from the minister, and it turned out to be the most touching moment of our life.

After church, bride and groom either get into a car whose flower decorated hood shows everybody that there is a just married couple inside or they take a coach with horses to take a ride to the restaurant. Accompanied by their horn honking guests in their white ribbon equipped cars, they make their way. Depending on the time schedule, the party may have coffee and cakes or directly starts dinner. Some couples now take the chance to have some wedding pictures taken.



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During dinner, everybody who wants to, at least the two fathers, make a speech to praise the new husband and wife. After that, bride and groom open the dance with a waltz, parents and witnesses join them. With the next song, all guests are invited to perform their ballroom dancing skills. Occasionally, dancing is interrupted by some friends or relatives who present little stakes to entertain the party. It is very popular to ask the couple to take part in those games.

Whereas in America, bride and groom leave the party after dinner to start their honeymoon immediately, in Germany they stay and celebrate until the last guest goes home. Consequently, this a very exhausting and long day (and night) for the new couple--my husband and I closed the party room at five a.m.!

A lot of just married couples head for their one to two week honeymoon on the next day and enjoy themselves on the beach recollecting the memories of their wonderful wedding.

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